

CHAPTER XVII

KIDNAPPED

IF Hiram Dobbs had not pronounced so serious a warning only a few hours previous, Dave would not have paid much attention to the incident of the moment.

Hiram had spoken of two rough looking characters in the company of Jerry Dawson. Here were a couple who filled the bill, strangers to Dave, and yet speaking his name in a way that was sinister.

"They're gone, whoever they are," said Dave a few moments later, and dismissed them from his mind for the time being.

He walked down the row of automobiles and other vehicles lining the main entrance road. There was quite a crowd. General admission to the grounds was free to any one respectable that day and evening.

Outside of the curious visitors who had gone the rounds of the hangars, there were groups of airmen and others discussing the features of the morrow's flights.

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Dave passed along through the crowds, interested in all he saw. When he got to that part of the broad roadway where the booths and crowds were sparser, he deviated to cross towards the hangars at one side of the great course.

He met a few people and here and there came across tents given to the exhibiting of some new model, or occupied by employes who worked about the field. Most of those who ate and slept on the grounds, however, were down at the center of animation near the big gate, and Dave's walk was a rather lonely one.

"It's going to be the week of my life," thought the youth. "I wonder if there's any hope at all of my taking a flight, as Hiram hinted. Not but that I believe I could manage a biplane as well as any amateur. Hello!"

Dave was rudely aroused from his glowing dreams as he passed a tent where a man with a lantern was tinkering over a motorcycle. Happening to glance back, Dave saw two stealthy figures in the dim distance.

"They are the men I noticed at the entrance," decided Dave. "There, they've split up. One has gone out of sight around the tent, and the other has made a pretence of stopping to watch the fellow mending that motorcycle."

Dave hastened his speed, making straight for the hangars. The row in which Mr. King

housed his machine was quite remote from the others. It was bright starlight, and glancing over his shoulders several times Dave was sure that he made out the two men he was suspicious of following in his tracks.

They neared him as he passed a row of temporary buildings. Dave had a mind to stop at one of these until his pursuers, if such they were, had made themselves scarce. Then, however, as he glanced around, he caught no sight of them.

"Pshaw!" "said Dave," what am I afraid of? Perhaps I'm making a mystery out of nothing. If those fellows intended to do me any harm, they'd have got at me long since. They've had plenty of chances. I'll make a bee line for home and forget all about them."

Dave put across an unoccupied space. At its edge were three temporary buildings. Two he knew held airships. One was quite famous. It belonged to a wealthy man named Marvin, who made aeronautics a fad. His machine was a splendid military monoplane of the latest model, and was listed to do some heavy air work in the next day's programme.

All the buildings were dark. Nobody seemed in their vicinity until Dave neared the larger one of the three where the military machine was housed. Then suddenly around one corner of the canvas house two men came into view.

"We've run him home, I guess," spoke the quick voice of one of them.

"Yes, there he goes, making for the tent," was the retort given in a breath.

Dave recognized the men as the fellows who had been so persistently following him. They had run ahead, it seemed, and waited for his coming. As they made a move towards him, showing that they intended to reach and seize him, Dave started running around the other side of the building. At this the men separated. One circled the building and headed him off. Dave ran back ten feet out of sight. Then, hearing the other fellow running on from the opposite direction, Dave crowded through a half open sliding door.

"He's gone," sounded on the outside, a minute later.

"No, he's slipped into that shed. I tell you we've run him home, and if nobody else is around we can soon finish up our business neat and quick."

Dave did not know what that "business" was. He stood still in the darkness and listened. His hand had touched the bamboo edge of a machine wing. He was thinking of seeking a hiding place, or some other door or window outlet from the shed, when a sudden flash blinded and confused him.

His pursuers had followed him into the place. One of them carried a portable electric light. Pressing its button, and focussing its rays first on one spot and then on another, its holder soon rested a steady glare on Dave.

"There he is," sounded out.

"Yes, grab him."

"All right."

"Got him?"

"Sure and safe."

Dave's captor had great brawny hands and handled the youth as he would a child. The men had come prepared for rough and ready action. The ruffian had felled Dave with a jerk and a slam, kept beside him, and in a twinkling had his hands and feet bound tightly. Dave set up a sharp outcry.

"We'll soon settle that," said his captor grimly.

Dave's lips were muffled with a gag so tightly fastened that for a few minutes he could scarcely breathe. The man who had dealt so summarily with him arose to his feet.

"What now?" asked his companion.

"Go out and see if the coast is clear."

"I know it is—our way. We're to make direct for the high fence behind the hangars. Near the freight gate, you know. We can open it from the inside."

"Let's be in a hurry, then. Remember there's something else to do."

"I haven't forgotten it. The job's easy this far. Come ahead."

"We'll have to carry him?"

"Yes."

Dave was lifted up and swung along by the two men as if he were a bag of grain. They made straight for the high rear fence of the grounds. This they followed for a few hundred feet.

"Here's the gate," announced one of the men, and they dropped Dave to the ground.

There was a jangling of chains and hasps. From where he lay Dave could see the open country beyond the gateway. He was carried through. Several vehicles were in view, and the horses attached to most of them were hitched to trees or the fence supports. Their owners, Dave judged, were up at a place some distance away. Here there were lights and animation. Dave knew that the building was located there, outside of the grounds, where the supplies from farmers and by rail were received.

"Say," spoke one of the men carrying him, "there's half a dozen horses and wagons here."

"Well, it's a light wagon with a white horse we were directed to."

"There it is—see that white horse yonder?"

"I guess you're right. Toddle along. This is no light lump of a youngster."

The men reached a light wagon. Its box was littered with straw and a lot of empty bags. It looked to Dave as if its owner had brought a load of potatoes to the aero meet.

"Give him a hoist," ordered one of the men.

Dave was lifted, swung, and dropped. He sank down among the bags and the straw almost out of sight.

"Now where's the man we were to meet, the driver of the wagon?" inquired the fellow who had bound and gagged Dave.

"Oh, he'll probably be here soon. You stay and wait for him and give him his orders. I'll go back and finish up the job."

"You can't do it alone. It won't take but a few minutes. You may want me to hold a light, or something."

"Got the tools?"

"Yes"—and the last speaker jangled something metallic in his pockets.

"All right. Let's waste no time. This is pretty neat, I call it—the lad settled, and the machine no good. I'm thinking old King will do some storming, when he tries another flight."

"I think so, too. Come on," was the retort, and the two men disappeared through the gateway of the aviation field.

CHAPTER XVIII

AN ALL-NIGHT CAPTIVITY

DAVE sank down in his soft bed of bags and straw, unable to move hand or foot.

The men who had made him a helpless prisoner had done their work well. Dave could not use a muscle. As to dislodging the gag or shouting, that seemed entirely out of the question.

The youth had lots of time to think. He blinked up at the stars, kept his ears on the alert, and waited for further developments.

"There's something to Hiram's warning, sure enough, he reflected." If this is the work of Jerry Dawson, he must be a pretty desperate fellow."

Then Dave began to worry. The last overheard words of his captors were enlightening. They had spoken as if it was fully intended to get him away from his present pleasant employment and keep him away from it. What affected Dave most seriously, however, was the hint of the two men that they had some evil designs against the *Aegis*.